

"We Need to Keep Our Carers"

Q: How did you become involved in the Pioneers Programme?

I've been fostering for around 17 years now. I started when my own children were still young, and over the years, I've cared for children of all ages – from newborns to teenagers. It's been my life's work, really. I became involved in the Pioneers Programme after another foster carer told me about it. I've always been one of those people who likes to help others, so it felt like a natural fit. I wanted to use my experience to make things easier for other carers – to support them the way I would have liked to be supported when I started.

It wasn't a big, formal thing at first. It began with just being someone people could call for advice or reassurance, and that grew into being part of something much bigger. Now, the Pioneers are recognised, and that makes a real difference.

Q: What does being a Pioneer mean to you personally?

For me, it's about being there for other carers. Sometimes that means a proper chat over coffee, and other times it's just being the person at the end of the phone when someone's having a wobble. We've all been there – nights where you're questioning if you're doing it right or feeling like you're the only one dealing with certain behaviours.

It's also about sharing knowledge. Between us, we've got so many years of experience – things we've learned the hard way. Being a Pioneer means passing that on so other carers don't feel so alone or overwhelmed.

It's made me more aware of how much carers need to be valued and supported. If we lose carers, it's not just a number; it's a family, a safe home, a relationship that's been built. We can't afford to lose good carers, and that's something I'm passionate about.

Q: How do you support other foster carers in your area?

A lot of it is about being approachable and available. We've got a network of carers who meet regularly, and we use group chats to stay connected. Someone might post, "Has anyone dealt with this before?" or "What did you do when...?" and straight away, there's a response. That kind of support is invaluable. I also do one-to-one support if someone is struggling. I remember one carer who was new and really doubting herself. She'd had a difficult review meeting and felt like she wasn't being listened to. We met up, talked through what had happened, and I helped her prepare what she wanted to say at the next meeting. She came out feeling much more confident. Sometimes it's just about helping people find their voice.

I've also helped with practical things like respite and training – linking carers up with others who can cover or support. It's the small gestures that make the biggest difference. When people know someone's got their back, they're more likely to stay in fostering.

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Q: What have you noticed changing through the Pioneers?

It's brought more structure and visibility to what we do. Before, it was all quite informal – carers helping carers quietly in the background. Now, people know who the Pioneers are and what we're here for. I think it's helped to bridge that gap between foster carers and the fostering team. We've become that link – the glue, really – between carers and professionals. If a carer's struggling to communicate something or feels unheard, we can step in and help make sure they're listened to. There's also been a real shift in how foster carers are seen. We're not just "babysitters" or "placements"; we're professionals, part of the child's team. The Pioneers have helped bring that respect into the conversation, and that's empowering.

Q: What about recruitment – is that something you've been involved in?

Yes, definitely. I've been out with the recruitment team, putting up banners, attending events, and just chatting to people who are thinking about fostering. I think it helps when they can talk to someone who's actually doing it – we can give honest answers about what it's really like. A lot of people have this idea of fostering that's very different from reality. When we talk openly about both the challenges and the rewards, it helps them make an informed choice. I've met people at events who've gone on to start the process, which feels brilliant. We've also talked about how to retain carers – because it's not just about bringing new people in. It's about keeping the ones we've got. That's something I care about deeply. If someone's struggling, we can help before it gets to the point where they think about giving up.

Q: What's been one of your most memorable experiences as a Pioneer?

One that sticks with me was supporting a carer who was close to giving up. She'd had a difficult placement – lots of challenging behaviour – and she just felt like she couldn't do it anymore. I went round for a cup of tea, and we talked for hours. I didn't give her any magic answers – just listened, reassured her that what she was feeling was normal, and reminded her of all the positives she'd achieved with the child. She messaged me a few weeks later to say things had improved, and that she was glad she hadn't given up. That's what being a Pioneer is about – being that bit of encouragement that keeps someone going when they're at their lowest. Sometimes that one conversation can make all the difference.

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Q: What challenges are you seeing in fostering at the moment?

There's definitely been more pressure on carers recently. Children are coming into care with increasingly complex needs, and the system is stretched. That can take a toll on carers' wellbeing.

We also need to keep communication strong. Sometimes information doesn't flow as it should between social workers and carers, and that can cause unnecessary stress. Having the Pioneers involved has helped improve that – we can pick up on things quickly and help find solutions.

Another challenge is making sure new carers feel properly supported in those early months. That's often when they need someone the most, and that's where we come in.

Final Reflection

The most significant change for me has been realising the power of peer support. Being a Pioneer isn't about being an expert – it's about being real, being available, and showing others that they're not alone. Fostering can be tough, but it's also incredibly rewarding. The Pioneers have helped us build a stronger community, where carers look out for each other and share what they've learned. If we can keep more carers by supporting and valuing them, that's a win for everyone – especially the children who need stability most.



Interviews carried out by Donna Thomas, Kat Applewhite and Roger Rowett in Autumn 2025.

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